

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 20, 2006  
TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL  
FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER   
SUBJECT: CONSIDERATION OF A POET LAUREATE PROGRAM FOR THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

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**ISSUE:** Consideration of a Poet Laureate Program for the City of Alexandria

**RECOMMENDATION:** That City Council:

- (1) receive the Poet Laureate proposal submitted by the Steering Committee (Attachment 1);
- (2) thank the members of the Steering Committee for their efforts on behalf of the City Council;
- (3) set this item for public hearing and consideration at Council's May 20 public hearing meeting; and
- (4) following the public hearing, if Council approves the Poet Laureate Program, allocate \$3,500 from the FY 2006 Contingent Reserves to the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities for the cost of the program.

**BACKGROUND:** In a memorandum to the City Manager and members of Council, Councilman Ludwig Gaines proposed the consideration of designating of an official City Poet Laureate. He stated, "...designating an official City Poet Laureate would provide a readily identifiable low to no-cost means of Alexandria to confirm publicly the value of literary arts. Moreover, in the same way that public art and music can enhance quality of life within a community, the enjoyment of poetry and literary arts can do the same. A Poet Laureate would serve as an official resource available to commemorate for present enjoyment, as well as posterity, the City's history and historic events, installations, groundbreakings and public dedications, as well as many of the City's annual celebrations, parades and cultural events. A Poet Laureate would also work to bring poetic art to the City's libraries and Schools and serve as a bridge to the city's diverse community that might not otherwise be exposed to it. And in difficult times, a Poet Laureate would be called upon to offer appropriate words of reflection, inspiration and healing."

The City of Alexandria's records show that in 1979, the Alexandria City Council voted Jean Elliott, a 78 year old Alexandria resident, as the City's "Poet in Residence" and placed a plaque on her South Fairfax Street home. Earlier, in 1977, former State Senator Wiley Mitchell, nominated Ms. Elliott and she was awarded "the Virginia Cultural Center's award for excellence in achievement in the field of Poetry" (Attachment 2). Ms. Elliott was the first and only Poet Laureate of record for the City of Alexandria. She passed away in 1999 (Attachment 3).

**DISCUSSION:** Following Councilman Gaines' request a Steering Committee consisting of citizens and City staff was established to develop a protocol for selecting a Poet Laureate for the City of Alexandria. Participants on the Committee included Colette Wachtel, Alexandria Commission for the Arts; Jon C. Burton, Northern Virginia Community College: Alexandria Campus; M. Magnus, Poet; Jim MacKay, Office of Historic Alexandria; Mark Schwartz, Alexandria City Public Library System; and Janet Barnett, and Cheryl Anne Powalisz, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities.

Through a series of meetings, the Steering Committee explored established Poet Laureate programs from around the country, including Sacramento, California; Denver, Colorado; and Telford, Pennsylvania's Montgomery County Poet Laureate program along with many others. The Committee considered these models with the goal of creating an appropriate program for Alexandria.

The Steering Committee created an Alexandria Poet Laureate Proposal which outlines the purposes, duties, qualifications, term of service, and application and selection process. The purposes and duties outlined for the Poet Laureate are: to promote poetry throughout the City of Alexandria, however, to also promote all forms of literature and literacy through poetry; to assist in developing an ongoing poetry and literature program that makes poetry and literature available to the citizens and visitors to the City of Alexandria; to be called upon as an honorary guest and to be asked to read from their body of work or those of other poets at City-wide events such as working with the schools, library system, recreation or senior centers, and appearances at the USA/Alexandria Birthday Celebration or other community festivals; and, to participate as a judge for City poetry competitions.

The Steering Committee recommends the Poet Laureate term of service be three years, that it be an honorary post and the selected individual accept the post as a ceremonial role with a small annual honorarium, which may include presentations of work appropriate for all audiences. In addition, the Committee created a "Call for Nominations" for the Alexandria Poet Laureate (Attachment 4).

The Alexandria Commission for the Arts fully endorses the Steering Committee's proposal and the establishment of a Poet Laureate program for the City of Alexandria.

If Council decides to proceed with this program, the Poet Laureate Program "Call for Nominations" will be sent out in June, with the review of entries to be in early September. The Committee recommends that the City's Poet Laureate be announced as part of the 2006 Alex Awards sponsored by the Alexandria Commission for the Arts with the presentation scheduled for

Friday, October 20, 2006, at the Dr. Oswald Durant Memorial Center, located at 1605 Cameron Street.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** The selected Poet Laureate will receive an annual honorarium of \$500, in addition to pre-approved out of pocket expenses. It is anticipated that these expenses along with administrative expenses (printing, postage and staff) will be approximately \$3,500 from the Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities budget and will need to be funded in the FY 2007 budget. If Council wishes to implement the program it will need to allocate \$3,500 from the contingent reserves account to fund the first year of the program.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- Attachment 1. Alexandria Poet Laureate Proposal
- Attachment 2. Poet Laureate Article, Alexandria Gazette, 1998
- Attachment 3. Poet Laureate Jean Elliott's Death Notice, Alexandria Gazette, 09/16/99
- Attachment 4. Alexandria Poet Laureate "Call for Nominations"

**STAFF:**

Kirk Kincannon, Director, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities  
Janet Barnett, Deputy Director, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities  
Cheryl Anne Powalisz, Recreation Supervisor II, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities/Alexandria Commission for the Arts  
Jim Mackay, Acting Director, Office of Historic Alexandria  
Patrick O' Brien, Director, Alexandria City Public Library  
Mark Schwartz, Public Information Officer, Alexandria City Public Library

## **ALEXANDRIA POET LAUREATE PROPOSAL**

### **(1) Purpose of the Alexandria Poet Laureate**

- Promotes an appreciation of poetry as an art form;
- Encourages creative writing and reading of all forms of literature; and,
- Promotes literacy through poetry.

### **2. Duties - What does the Poet Laureate do?**

- Honorary post, whose primary role is to promote poetry throughout the City of Alexandria, however to also promote all forms of literature and literacy through poetry.
- Assist in developing an ongoing poetry or literature program that makes poetry and literature available to the citizens and visitors to the City of Alexandria.
- Will be called upon to be an honorary guest and be asked to read from their body of work or those of other poets at city-wide events such as working with the schools, library system, recreation or senior centers, and appearances at the USA/Alexandria Birthday Celebration or other community festivals.
- Participate as a judge for City poetry competitions.
- Must accept the Poet Laureate post as a ceremonial role, to include presentations of work appropriate for all audiences.

### **3. Members of the Steering Committee - Who are we?**

- Citizen and/or a poet;
- Higher education representative;
- Member from Office of Historic Alexandria;
- Member from the Alexandria Commission for the Arts;
- Member from the Alexandria City Public Library System; and
- Staff from the Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities.

### **4. The Call - Publicity and Promotion**

- Propose sending out the "Call" in June 2006, with a minimum of 90 days from sending out the "Call" to the deadline.
- Propose to begin review of entries in early September. Minimum of one month for first tier review of entries, and two or three weeks from selection of finalists to second tier review and selection.

### **5. Qualifications for a Poet Laureate**

- Distinguish self in the field of poetry through the body of work created;
- Be a resident of the City of Alexandria for a minimum of one year and maintain residency through the three year term of service;

- Must accept the Poet Laureate post as a ceremonial role, to include presentations of work appropriate for all audiences; and,
- Minimum of 18 years of age;

**6. Application Process**

- Potential candidates may self-nominate, or be nominated.
- Entries must include no more than 10 separate works. Any style, form, or length, work to be original published or unpublished..
- Typewritten or word processed, one side or photo copied poems from books or magazines are acceptable–no handwritten submissions; and,
- Readable font type and 12 point size
- Entries should include a 250 word essay answering the question: “What can you (or the nominee) bring to the role of Poet Laureate for the City of Alexandria?”

**7. Judges for the Selection Process**

Recommendation the following positions for the judges:

- Two At Large Citizens of the City of Alexandria;
- Published Poet;
- Member from the Alexandria Commission for the Arts;
- Member from the Alexandria Arts Forum;
- Member of the Alexandria Library Board;
- Higher Education representative;
- An English or Language Arts Curriculum Specialist or Teacher from one of the Public or Private Schools in the City of Alexandria; and,
- A representative from the Business community (i.e. Chamber of Commerce or business leader).

**8. Criteria for Selection/Selection Process**

- The selection process will be two tier. First tier, judges to read all entries and choose top entries for a panel review. Second tier, judges to hold a panel interview with the top entry candidates. Candidates may be asked at that time to read some of their works, along with answering questions relating to how they perceive the Poet Laureate post.

**9. Term of Service**

Recommendation the term of service be for three years.

**10. Honorarium**

The Poet Laureate to receive an annual honorarium of \$500, and pre-approved out of pocket expenses.

# Poet Laureate celebrates 97th birthday

BARBARA SULLIVAN

Staff Writer

In the autumn of 1977, Jean Elliot of Old Town received a letter from the president of the Virginia Cultural Laureate Center in Richmond congratulating her on having been chosen to receive "the Virginia Cultural Center's award for excellence in achievement in the field of Poetry." Former State Senator Wiley Mitchell (R-Alexandria) had nominated her as part of a state program to honor the creative arts.

By 1979, her only book of poetry, "A Starrier Coldness," published by the Golden Quill Press of Franconia, New Hampshire, was already out of print, with only 100 copies having been circulated. Today, as her aide of 20 years, Marcie Daniels prepares for Jean's 97th birthday party this weekend, there is a lovingly worn, dog-eared copy of the poetry book beside the author on a table. Marcie or visiting friends will read favorite poems aloud.

One of those friends is longtime rector of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House, Dr. William Sengel. On a recent visit, he enthusiastically opened his own copy of the book, and went straight to the following two short poems:

#### Executions

*I have been guillotining peonies  
chopping off elegant heads relentlessly,  
tumbling crowns into a tumbrel:  
when these decapitated aristocrats  
have all gone to the compost  
what will replace their regalia?*

#### Suggestion to a Wolfe Street Neighbor

*Should you pull a mermaid  
out of the Potomac,  
bring her here  
but never again fetch us a catfish.*

*Let those contaminated creatures live.  
Better we starve  
than fatten on dung-nourished flesh  
no matter how sweet to the tongue.*

In 1979, when the City Council of Alexandria voted her "Poet in Residence" and had a plaque placed upon her home, she said, "Heaven only knows why they made me poet laureate. I think it's silly." She was described at that time as being tall and slender, "a spry 78-year-old grande dame of Old Town" with Wedgewood blue eyes said to "reflect a full and provocative life but sparkle with what is yet to be." Her social commentary was often sharp and creative, i.e.



Jean Elliot in 1988

#### Cocktail Clamor

*How like the undulation of the sea  
this human surge of sound rolls over me;  
with half closed eyes I listen to the roar  
and fancy breakers crashing on the shore.  
Against such loud pulsation I can't speak;  
were I a gale I might be heard — a shriek  
could pierce the clamor. Here my senses tell  
the surf more sure than if I held a shell  
against one ear — not far away;  
no ocean, in this crowd, resounds today.*

Born Jean Robertson on July 12, 1901 in Yonkers, New York, she later moved to neighboring Bronxville, then an art colony. Her mother died when she was quite young, after which she and a younger sister were sent to live in their paternal grandfather's Dutch Reform parsonage. At some point she was sent to a "Southern finishing school [in Hendersonville, NC] to smooth out some of the rough edges." Her maternal grandfather is said to have built the first Presbyterian Church in New Orleans in 1834.

"There has been a relative preacher in my family for 170 years," she said, calmly mentioning that some of those ancestors had been instrumental in founding such institutions as Harvard, Yale and Princeton, the latter being her husband's [R. Sherrard "Sherry" Elliot's], alma mater. She is also a descendant of Anne Bradstreet, the first acknowledged American female poet.

For a while, Jean Elliot was a preliminary

reader of poetry for *The New Yorker*. She also edited other poetry books, including "Castles of Singing" by Melissa Lovejoy Hill and Campbell Reeves'

"Bane of Jewels," both of which were dedicated to her.

Jean's husband, Sherry Elliot, was originally a New York City banker. While married and again living in Bronxville, where they remained until relocating here in the 1960, Jean Elliot began another career as historian. She was a trustee, and later a life member of the Westchester County New York Historical Society. She later brought her historical curiosity to Alexandria. She lectured on the Origins of Alexandria; she gave classes at the old YMCA on topics too numerous to mention, and spent countless hours researching such things as who might have been buried in the Old Presbyterian Meeting House's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a topic about which she wrote many columns in the former Alexandria Packet newspaper. The following was inspired when exploring Christ Church:

#### Lines In Christ Church Grave Yard

*Time honored dead beneath my feet  
rest in a silence so complete  
that none can ever hear their sighing;  
they who escaped from noise by dying  
need never listen any more.*

*I do not know upon this floor  
of turf so carpet-thick  
how I can tell the dead from quick.  
I only know I envy them  
this quiet millennium.*

When the Elliots moved to Alexandria, it was because Sherry had a job as vice president of the Financial General Corporation; he also served on the board of the old First American Bank. He was a patron of the arts, active in the Athenaeum, the Little Theatre and other local groups.

In the early 1980s, Jean and Sherry Elliot commissioned sculptor Jimilu Mason who lives in both Alexandria and Pietra Santa, a small town near Pisa in Italy, to do a sculpture for Market Square. The Elliots picked what Mason calls "Brio" from the musical term "con brio," meaning lively. The sculpture was created in clay in Italy and cast in bronze in Italy before its formal presentation to the City of Alexandria.

Sherry Elliot died in 1987.

A former vice president of the Alexandria Association, Jean Elliot may have found it silly to have been named poet laureate for the state, but she certainly deserves to be a well-recognized contributor in residence in the city of Alexandria.

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V.F. Brio. Elliot Sept. 16, 1999

# Deaths

## Poet Laureate Jean Elliot Dies at 98

By **BARBARA SULLIVAN**  
Gazette Writer

Longtime city resident and former Virginia poet laureate Jean Elliot died Sunday, Sept. 12, at her house in Old Town. She had celebrated her 98th birthday two months earlier.

She and her husband, R. Sherrard "Sherry" Elliot, first lived in Bronxville, N.Y., then moved to Alexandria in 1960 when he became a vice president of the Financial General Corp.

After her arrival, Elliot became a local historian, spending countless hours researching things that interested her. She is perhaps best known for researching who might have been buried in the Old Presbyterian Meeting House's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. She also lectured on a wide variety of topics and wrote a column for the Alexandria Gazette.

In the early 1980s Jean and Sherry Elliot, both avid patrons of art in Alexandria, commissioned Jimilu Mason of Alexandria to do a sculpture for Market Square. The Elliots picked "Brio," which comes from the musical term "con brio," meaning lively.

Born Jean Robertson on July 12, 1901, in Yonkers, N.Y., she and her family later moved to the Westchester County, N.Y., town of Bronxville, which in the early 1900s was an art colony.

After her mother's early death, she and her younger sister were sent to live in their paternal grandfather's Dutch Reformed parsonage. Her maternal grandfather is said to have built the first Presbyterian Church in New Orleans in 1834.

When interviewed in the late 1970s, she said, "There has been a relative preacher in my family for 170 years," then mentioned that certain ancestors had been instrumental in founding such institutions as Harvard, Yale and Princeton.

Elliot attended a finishing school in Hendersonville, N.C., "to smooth out some rough edges" she said.

Also descended from Anne Bradstreet, the first acknowledged American female poet, Elliot's first job was a preliminary reader of poetry at The New Yorker magazine. She often wrote poetry as well.

In 1977, Elliot was chosen by the Virginia Cultural Laureate Center in

Richmond to receive their highest award for achievement in the field of poetry. Former State Sen. Wylie Mitchell (R-Alexandria) had nominated her to receive the award.

In 1979, the Alexandria City Council voted her to be "Poet in Residence," and placed a plaque on her South Fairfax Street home. She was described then as "a spry 78-year-old grande dame of Old Town, with sparkling Wedgwood blue eyes that reflect a full and provocative life."

In 1973, a book of her poetry, "A Starrier Coldness," was published by Golden Quill Press.

Jean Elliot's husband, banker R. Sherrard "Sherry" Elliot, died in 1987. They had no children. Jean Elliot was cared for in recent years by Marcie Daniels, who each July arranged a birthday party and who often read poetry to her.

A memorial service in Jean Elliot's honor will be held at 1 p.m. at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House near her home. Her dear friend of many years, Dr. William Sengel, pastor emeritus of the Presbyterian Meeting House, will participate in the service.

**ALEXANDRIA POET LAUREATE  
"Call for Nominations"**

**Purpose of the Alexandria Poet Laureate:**

Promotes an appreciation of poetry as an art form; encourages creative writing and reading of all forms of literature; and, promotes literacy through poetry.

**Eligibility:** Distinguish self in the field of poetry through the body of work created; Be a resident of the City of Alexandria for a minimum of one year and maintain residency through the three year term of service; Must accept the Poet Laureate post as a ceremonial role, to include presentations of work appropriate for all audiences; and, minimum of 18 years of age.

**Entry Rules:** Candidates may self-nominate, or be nominated. Entries must include no more than 10 separate works. Any style, form, or length, work to be original published or unpublished. Typewritten or word processed, one side or photo copied poems from books or magazines are acceptable. Readable font type and 12 point size. **DO NOT PLACE NAME OR ADDRESS ON POETRY PAGES.** Attach entry form with paper clip to packet of poems. List titles of poems, name, address, and phone number on opposite side of this page. *If return of manuscript is desired, enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with sufficient postage. \*Please do not send certified mail.*

Entries should include a 250 word essay answering the question: "What can you (or the nominee) bring to the role of Poet Laureate for the City of Alexandria?"

**Deadline:** Entries must be mailed to: The Alexandria Poet Laureate, c/o Alexandria Commission for the Arts, 1108 Jefferson Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 Manuscript must be post-marked **NO LATER** than close of business Tuesday, September 5, 2006.

**Notification:** Winner will be notified by October 18, 2006. Please note: All entries will be judged anonymously.

**Awards:** \$500 annual honorarium to the winner and a formal awards presentation will be part of the 2006 Alex Awards scheduled for Friday, October 20, 2006 at the Dr. Oswald Durant Memorial Center, 1605 Cameron Street, Alexandria.

**Judges:** Two Citizens from the City of Alexandria; Published Poet; Member from the Alexandria Commission for the Arts; Member from the Alexandria Arts Forum; Higher Education representative; An English or Language Arts Curriculum Specialist or Teacher from one of the Public or Private Schools in the City of Alexandria; A representative from the Business community (i.e. Chamber of Commerce or business leader); and, a member from the Alexandria Library Board.

**Selection Process:** The selection process will be two tier. First tier, judges to read all entries and choose top entries for a panel review. Second tier, judges to hold a panel interview with the top entry candidates. Candidates may be asked at that time to read some of their works, along with answering questions relating to how they perceive the Poet Laureate post.

**For further information or additional entry forms please write to:** Alexandria Commission for the Arts, 1108 Jefferson Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, or visit <http://alexandriacommissionforthearts.org>  
The Alexandria Commission for the Arts assumes no responsibility for loss of any work and will not be responsible for return of work unless a stamped, self-addressed envelope with sufficient postage is enclosed. *(Need to decide if we will or will not return poems/manuscripts)*

ENTRY FORM  
ALEXANDRIA POET LAUREATE  
"Call for Nominations"  
*Please print clearly*

Name of Nominee: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number (day): \_\_\_\_\_ (evening) \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE LIST TITLES OF POEMS:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

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Nominator's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number (day): \_\_\_\_\_ (evening) \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Does the nominee know you have submitted their name for consideration as the Poet Laureate?  
 Yes or  No

Manuscript must be post-marked NO LATER than close of business Tuesday, September 5, 2006.

Entries should be mailed to:  
The Alexandria Poet Laureate  
c/o Alexandria Commission for the Arts  
1108 Jefferson Street, Alexandria, VA 22314